

Translated excerpt

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Hitlers Hofstaat. Der innere Kreis im Dritten Reich und danach

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Hitler's Court. The Führer's Inner Circle in the Third Reich and Afterward

Translated by Jefferson Chase



Introduction

In spring of 2020, a short time after my biography of Eva Braun was published, a gentleman whose name immediately awakened my curiosity got in touch with me via the C.H.Beck publishing house. Claus Dirk von Below was the son of Luftwaffe adjutant and long-time Hitler confidante Nicolaus von Below. Now he wished to speak with me. Over the phone we agreed to meet, and a few weeks later we were sitting face to face in a café in the center of Munich. Our conversation started with his parents' relationship to Hitler and Eva Braun and the Belows' life in the dictator's private circle at his Berghof retreat in the Alps. "I grew up in this circle," remarked Claus Dirk von Below almost offhandedly, adding that it had by no means disbanded after the Second World War. On the contrary, the connections between the circle's members had persisted well into the history of the post-war Federal Republic of Germany. Members had regularly corresponded with and visited one another and had organized larger get-togethers on special occasions. "We all travelled to Heidelberg to receive Albert Speer," Below recalled about the time after Speer was released from an Allied prison for war criminals in Berlin-Spandau on September 30, 1966. "My parents," he continued, "were dyed-in-the-wool National Socialists until the day they died."

All at once, I realized that what Speer called "the Führer circle" had apparently continued to exist without the Führer himself and had kept alive Hitler's legacy for decades after his death. The Nazi dictatorship may have essentially ceased to exist when Hitler took his own life in the air-raid bunker of the Reich Chancellery on April 30, 1945, but most of his closest servants and associates had survived. What had become of them? Who were the people who had populated Hitler's most intimate environment over so many years? How had they made their way into the center of power? What were the inner workings of this "court," whose members were not usually the most prominent and powerful figures in the Third Reich but rather an assortment of people often dismissed as Hitler's "chauffeurs and their ilk," a "society of middle-class mediocrity and semi-criminal rowdiness" that had largely kept out of the public eye?

This book will offer a comprehensive picture of the "Berghof society," which even today remains shrouded by obscurity, and its predecessors. This society consisted of people who were invited into Hitler's private refuge on the Obersalzberg mountain and who continued to meet up, largely unnoticed by the outside world, after 1945. In this book, we will take a closer look at the men

and women whose post-war memoirs are often cited in an attempt to explain Hitler but who have themselves always been treated as bit players. It is frequently said that Hitler was able, all by himself, to accrue an unprecedented amount of power and was a man without empathy, a private life or human contacts. But if that is so, why should Hitler have needed a close, constantly available circle of people, which – as was not the case with the circles around Stalin, for instance – included a surprising number of women. What were the criteria by which Hitler selected these people? What role did they play in his private and political life? Were Hitler's social relationships, as little attention as they may have received in the past, perhaps the source of his personal power?

Historians have thus far failed to reconstruct or appreciate the function and the inner workings of this social circle. The conventional historical wisdom, based as it is on ex post facto memoirs, has always been assumed that those servants and political allies who enjoyed "unlimited privileged access" to the Nazi leader never penetrated the "external mantle of the Führer" and got to know him as a person. Conversely it is supposed that Hitler only exploited his loyal disciples, as he did all other people, getting rid of them "as soon as they served their purpose." But what was it really like to live alongside Hitler? How did confidantes profit from their close connections, based on dogmatic loyalty fealty, to the dictator? How culpable and complicit were they in his crimes? To address these questions, we will look at previously unavailable source material, for instance, personal effects that have never before been analyzed. They include photographs such as the ones contained in the Hoffmann Archive in the Bavarian State Library. These images deserve to be taken seriously and offer just as much insight as the oral and written statements of the protagonists into the network, paths of communication and involvement of Hitler's inner circle in the criminal activities of the Nazi regime.

Can we reconstruct what went on in Hitler's immediate social environment on 9 November 1938, the start of the pogrom commonly known as the Night of Broken Glass? What did the members of his personal staff and his closest acquaintances know about his intention to go to war and what he hoped to achieve by it? It is matter of record that by both Albert Speer and Hitler's personal physician Karl Brandt, who enjoyed the status of "special envoys reporting directly to the Führer," were involved, respectively, in the deportation of Jews to the death camps and the murder of congenitally ill and handicapped people. But how culpable were the other doctors, adjutants, secretaries, photographers, servants and standing Berghof guests who made up the rest Hitler's "court?" How many of them can be categorized as accomplices? How many knew of Hitler's crimes? After all, in various constellations, these people accompanied the Führer on trips and state visits and to receptions, concerts and party rallies. They experienced firsthand the hysteria engendered by the "Führer cult." How typical was, for example, Speer when, swayed by Hitler's worldview and the attraction he asserted on the masses during the time of the dictator's greatest foreign-policy coups, the architect deified Hitler as a "shaker of worlds?"

Right from the start of the Second world War, Allied intelligence took an interest not only in Hitler and the Nazi elites, but in all the people with whom Hitler surrounded himself in Berlin and on the Obersalzberg. Even before US troops marched into Germany, the American Office of Strategic Services (OSS) had detailed knowledge about the Führer circle, many of whose members remained obscure in the Third Reich itself. Hence, in the spring of 1945, the Americans were able to target people for detention and interrogation to find out whether Hitler was possibly still alive and on the run. When Soviet troops besieged Berlin, the Red Army's espionage service also went looking for Hitler's intimates and took those they found to Moscow, where the "Reich Chancellery Group" was subjected to years of questioning. In Germany, however, after the catastrophic end to the war, the demise of the Nazi regime and the Allied occupation of the country, the surviving members of Hitler's circle were quickly forgotten. Those who fled Berghof or the Chancellery bunker in Berlin in late April 1945 were subjected to "automatic arrest," internment, Allied interrogation and criminal trials and de-Nazification hearings. That only solidified the network that connected them – hardly a surprise considering how thoroughly the myth of a "zero hour" in post-war Germany has been debunked. Considerable attention has been focused on how some Nazi state and party elites held on to positions of power after 1945. Yet it is equally interesting to examine the previously ignored group of Hitler's intimates. They exemplify many aspects of the "politics of the past" - and how National Socialism was dealt with after 1945.

Who was part of this "circle without a Führer," whose composition and function changed over time? How did its members live after the collapse of the Nazi dictatorship? How did they exist in the democratic Federal Republic of Germany in west, Communist East Germany and abroad? What role did their pasts play in their new presents? These questions have scarcely been looked into. What did the caesura of 1945 mean to them? How were they affected and how did they react to the massive upheaval entailed by foreign occupation, the division of Germany, democratization in the west and Sovietization in the east? Did the members of Hitler's personal staff, his adjutants, his social circles and party and military representatives simply regroup around their collective experience of the past? Did their identification with the Führer continue unbroken? Did they remain unconditionally faithful to Hitler even after his death, maintaining the bond with which the Führer had once entrusted them? Hitler's secretary Christa Schröder, for instance, once stated during questioning by an American Counter-Intelligence Corps (CIC) officer in Berchtesgaden in May 1945 that she had "taken greater part in Hitler's life than any member of his family." Schröder also asserted that she was "the key" to accessing the surviving member of the inner circle after the war, and in fact in the late 1960s she provided British historian and Holocaust denier David Irving with an entrée into the closed society of Hitler's former intimates. How did these people view Irving and the other historians and journalists who sought to use access to the group for their own ends?

The social and economic reintegration of former National Socialists into West German society only commenced in the Adenauer era, often after those concerned had been questioned for years. With the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem in 1961 and the Auschwitz trials in Frankfurt am Main from 1963 to 1968, Nazi crimes were re-examined and re-debated before the eyes of the world. How did this re-encounter with the past affect the Führer's former circle? Did some members change their views? Did the group split into recalcitrants and dissidents? Or did the circle arrived at agreements and common rules concerning language and wording in their dealings with journalists and historians? Here we will focus on the parents and siblings of Eva Braun, who as Hitler's consort had attracted great media attention right from the start of the post-war period. To what extent was the Braun family part of this network? After all, the early Eva Braun biographer Nerin E. Gun was not only friends with Irving – he also gave her access to the Braun family and other members of Hitler's inner circle. We will also re-examine Speer's career and his own depiction of his past. The self-representation of Hitler's former disciples mirrors how the politics of the past changed in West Germany. After all, Hitler's minions stood to benefit from depicting him as evil personified and themselves – for instance in the memoirs of Hitler's secretary Traudl Junge, which served as the basis for the 2004 film *The Downfall* – as being trapped in a "blind spot" of a monster and his crimes.

Aside from our understanding of the past, did members of what Irving called the "magic circle" have any influence on political events in either the Federal Republic or the East German GDR? Were they able in the initially fragile but increasingly stable democracy of West Germany to carve out a "life after the end" by "keeping their heads down and being opportunistic?" Was this perhaps the case, too, in Communist East Germany? The network of the men and women of Hitler's most intimate circle before and after 1945 still existed in the generations of their children and grandchildren. The legends they advanced to conceal their own pasts continue to have currency even today. By tracing their lives from the Third Reich to the post-war period, we gain new insights into how we deal with our own history.

Summer of Blood: 1934

On the morning of 7 June 1934, as Hitler's chief adjutant Wilhelm Brückner returned to his apartment from Reich Chancellery. The body of a young blonde woman lay on his bed. Gerda Sommer, a 22-year-old from Berlin whom he had met a few weeks before, was dead. Nonetheless it took 24 hours for the police to arrive and to inform the woman's parents. Fritz Sommer, who was employed at the Dresdner Bank, and his wife Anni made their way to Albrecht-Achilles-Strasse 5 in the Wilmersdorf district of Berlin, where Brückner sublet a room in the rented apartment of his school chum, the lawyer Reinhold Widmann-Laemmert. This was the room in which Gerda's body still lay. Two young friends of the Sommers also showed up: John Idris Morgan and Laurence Henry Whitehead, who worked for a London bank and were doing apprenticeships at Dresdner. Idris Morgan, who since coming to Germany in September 1933 had practically become a member of the Sommer family, described the following chilling scene: "Gerda's body still lay sprawled, fully-clothed, on the bed; she looked terrible – she had not washed off her make-up before lying down and there were yellowish and pink streaks at the corners of her mouth. Brückner came in while we were there – a big man, tall, over 6 ft. and broad, with student duelling scars on his face – I would put him at about forty. He said the body could be moved as he and the undertakers had arranged everything and there would be no inquest."

Idris Morgan, whose diary is the sole reason this affair has not been completely forgotten, learned that day that Gerda Sommer, accompanied by her friend Hilde Wittke and Wittke's boyfriend Rolf Becker, had travelled with Brückner to the Baltic Sea on June 1-2. Brückner – whose true age was 49 years old and who had been in charge of Hitler's personal adjutants since the latter had assumed the office of German chancellor – had taken a few days off while the "boss" was in Munich. Normally, Brückner accompanied Hitler to all his major appointments, including his almost weekly sojourns to Bavaria, where the Nazi leader felt more at home than Berlin. For Brückner, too, Munich was the center of his life. That was where his ex-wife Anna lived, as did his long-time girlfriend Sofie Stork. Stork was an artist, a member of the Nazi Party since 1931 and, together with Brückner, part of Hitler's inner circle, where she was considered her boyfriend's fiancée. Brückner was much more than just an armed bodyguard. His direct, almost unlimited access to the Führer gave him a position of considerable power. Almost all of Hitler's contacts with the outside world took place via Brückner: he established connections, provided the Führer with information, coordinated visits and decided who would even be admitted to his master's presence. He also managed large sums of cash, 5000

reichsmarks or more every month, which he splashed out generously, paying Hitler's hotel, restaurant and café bills. He also used the money to cover expenses caused by Hitler's adjutants, employees and his entourage of servants, drivers, travelling physicians and actors. In addition, he doled out monetary gifts to people from Hitler's private circle of acquaintances.



John Idris Morgan with Gerda Sommer and her family, Berlin, 1933

Brückner's lifestyle must have made a huge impression on Gerda Sommer, who was chronically broke, and she was quite aware of his status. He had introduced himself as Hitler's personal adjutant, as she confided to her friend Idris Morgan on 28 May 1934. We do not know precisely where and when she met Brückner, who was almost thirty years her senior. Sommer, who didn't have a steady job but had no qualms about living beyond her means, still resided with her parents, which was not unusual for unmarried young women back then. She hadn't told her family about the trip to the Baltic Sea, apparently because her father objected to her dissipate lifestyle, fluctuating male companions and nights out until the wee hours of the morning, and the two often quarreled. At the start of the year, Gerda had simply disappeared for several days with her friend Hilde. When she returned from her jaunt with Brückner, presumably on June 5, she had had another raging fight with her father, as Idris Morgan chronicled. The following day, she never showed up for some temporary office work, going instead to Albrecht-Achilles-Strasse 5, where a servant girl admitted her to the apartment where Brückner roomed. There, Gerda called Brückner in the Chancellery, and later the pair went out to eat in a restaurant. Around 2:30 AM, Brückner first drove

her to her parents' apartment on Württembergische Strasse and then ended up taking her along back to his room, which was only five minutes away, because she feared her father's ire. Brückner himself didn't spend the night at home. Instead, he drove back to the Chancellery, only returning over the course of the following morning.

It's unclear what happened in the more than eight hours between the early morning of 7 June 1934 and 11 AM, the official time of Gerda's death, in Brückner's room. Did she really committed suicide through inhaling gas, as the police report the following day states? Or did she die of something else? Was she perhaps even murdered? It's equally unclear why Brückner allowed Gerda's body to lie on his bed for a whole day before calling the police and having the woman's remains taken on June 8 with the "train line of the dead" from Berlin-Halensee station to the Southwest Cemetery in Stahndorf outside the city limits. There, Gerda Sommer was buried on June 12.

What is clear is that a dead young woman in room was a personally and politically precarious, perhaps even dangerous situation for Brückner. Heady days were underway. Reich president Paul von Hindenburg had left Berlin and retreated, seriously ill, to his country estate Neudeck in East Prussia. Without him, the country lacked orientation and, a struggle for power was raging within the Nazi Party, with preparations already being made to curtail rebellion within the SA and murder its leader Ernst Röhm, Brückner's old friend and associate. On June 5, shortly after Brückner had returned from the Baltic Sea and Hitler from Munich, Röhm attended consultations in the Chancellery. It is unclear when the meeting took place, but it was probably on June 6 or 7, the point at which Sommer died in Brückner's room. Nor do we know what was talked about, although Hitler indicated that the meeting went on for several hours. On June 7, the German News Office (DNB) – the Nazi regime's newly formed press agency – reported that according to the highest SA leadership (i.e. Hitler) that Minister Röhm had gone "a course of sick leave of several weeks," which had been ordered by "his doctors." For all intents and purposes, Röhm had been fired – and with him the entire SA, which was also ordered to take time off. The following day, in a public statement, Röhm warned the "enemies of the SA" against mistakenly believing that his organization would "not return either partially or fully" from its compulsory sabbatical and could be written off as a political force. In fact, Röhm never came back. His adversaries – above all Göring, Goebbels, Himmler and the leadership of the rival Reichswehr – had been conspiring against him for months. His end was already sealed.

Röhm had contributed to his own downfall by allowing armed SA men, far more so than the SS, to spread fear and terror throughout the Reich. SA thugs boasted that they were Germany's true army, arbitrarily arrested and mistreated putative enemies, and made no bones about displaying

their power. At the same time, in memoranda and speeches, sometimes to foreign audiences, Röhm continued to agitate for the SA to take over the Reichswehr, thereby Nazifying the army, as part of a radical remaking of Germany into a classless, national-socialist society. In so doing, he not only challenged the authority of the state but openly defied the orders of Hitler, who had categorically ruled out a “second revolution.” That went well beyond what had been dared by any of Röhm’s former associates, including Gregor Strasser, who in December 1932 had gone behind Hitler’s back to negotiate with General Kurt von Schleicher about the Nazi Party joining a government without Hitler as chancellor. Strasser had subsequently resigned all his party offices, and the Nazi Führer had reacted to this instance of bad faith with a memorandum in which he elevated “loyalty” and the “imperative of obedience” derived from it to be the “foundation” of his political movement. If loyalty were not maintained, Hitler’s aura as Führer was worthless. Only faith in the person of Adolf Hitler, prioritized as the highest duty and expressed in the absolute fealty of his followers, could legitimize his authority and made it unassailable. Hitler needed at all costs to prevent the Nazi Party from splitting into interest groups so that his rise to the pinnacle of the state apparatus could be converted into a permanent dictatorship.

Life at Berghof

After 1945, very few of the former regular guests at Berghof spoke about what life was like at Hitler's Alpine retreat, one of the best-kept secrets of the Third Reich. As a result our understanding of the daily routines, topics of conversation and rivalries within Berghof society was dominated by the man most prone to make public statements after the demise of the Nazi regime: Albert Speer. In his memoirs, he extensively described the everyday rituals when Hitler's "court" convened in the years up until the start of the war in 1939. Hitler would commonly appear late in the morning. The seating order among the twenty or so guests at lunch was pre-arranged. After the meal, the company would parade up to the tea house at the Mooslahner Kopf peak. Eva Braun or one of the other women would always be seated next to the Führer, who would hold endless monologues during which even Speer sometimes fell asleep. The company would then return to Berghof, dinner would be served two hours later and all present would repair to the fireplace in the Great Hall until the early morning hours. If Speer is to be believed, this sequence repeated itself with scarcely bearable monotony as long as no Reich ministers or guests of state were present. It was always the same company, Speer wrote, who listened to Hitler with "simulated attention," while their minds wandered elsewhere. Genuine conversations were an extreme rarity, with the company merely chatting about "trivialities." According to Speer, Berghof was a never-ending construction site – with as much noise as a "suddenly fashionable spa" – because Hitler had badly planned the main house. Even the furniture was uncomfortable. This depiction of the dictator's Alpine retreat created a sensation when Speer's memoirs were published in the late 1960s. In them, reader thought, an insider had characterized a location mystified in Nazi propaganda as considerably less than romantic and Hitler himself, the all-powerful despot historian whom Ian Kershaw deemed a "propagandist...manipulator...[and] mobilizer" as a terrible bore who couldn't even command the attention of his truest followers.

During Hitler's lifetime, this cordoned off stretch of Alpine Bavaria had piqued the imaginations of people both within and outside Germany. But with the Nazis' elevation to power, the only public interior and exterior images of Berghof allowed in Germany were the censored photos Hoffmann took for his pictorial books *Hitler in His Mountains* (1935) and *Hitler Away from Everyday Life* (1937) and for millions of authorized postcards. The curiosity of the international audience was sated by a series of photo reports in British and American magazines in the summer of 1936. For these pieces, Hitler had opened the doors of his retreat, so that well-known journalists could get a look at his private life. The timing was no accident. In August 1936, the Olympic Games took place in Berlin. For the Nazi state, which had just been successfully consolidated, the Games were a media

event par excellence and opportunity to attract great attention and prestige for fascist Germany and its Führer. In the run-up to the Olympics, in response to the bloody purges, masses of Jewish refugees and racist “Nuremberg laws,” there had been calls in the US to boycott the games. So the regime needed to provide positive images of what it promoted as a strong but powerful and modern new Germany.



On the Berghof terrace. In the foreground: Albert Speer. In the background: Eva Braun on the deck chair with Gretl Braun, Christa Schroeder, Karl Brandt, Marion Schönmann, Hanni Morell, Hermann Esser and others, Obersalzberg, around 1940

Promptly, in July 1936, the American magazine *Current Affairs* published an article by journalist William George Fitz-Gerald entitled “Holiday with Hitler,” which depicted the dictator as a harmless private individual enjoying his second home on the Obersalzberg. It was followed by similar reports in many illustrated publications including the US edition of *Vogue* and the *New York Times Magazine*. Hitler was depicted in his retreat in the same way that star actors of the day were portrayed in their luxury villas. Then as it is now, “celebrity homes” was a popular genre. Such pieces didn’t criticize their subjects in the slightest, passing on the pretense from Nazi propaganda that Hitler had built his retreat himself, that he led a simple life and that he was constantly on the job. These lies were intended to introduce a measure of “normalcy.” Germany’s economic revival and the foreign-policy successes achieved by the Führer and celebrated by the German masses - the reintegration of Saarland into the Reich and the open violation of the hated Treaty of Versailles with Germany’s rearmament and deployment of the Wehrmacht in demilitarized Rhineland – had made countries abroad willing to compromise. Ordinary Germans overlooked the suffering of their marginalized and persecuted compatriots, while Germans in political exile, disappointed by the Western powers’ inaction, could only follow the triumphs of the “horrific man of the people,” as Thomas Mann dubbed Hitler, on the radio and hope in vain that the Nazi regime would collapse.

Fitz-Gerald was able to sell his story multiple times. In 1938, he even made it into the November edition of the popular British magazine *Homes and Gardens*. Over three pages, the journalist recounted his visit with Hitler and described how the dictator lived outside the “tumult” of Berlin. The Führer, wrote Fitz-Gerald, led an existence not unlike that of a Munich merchant on his small estate, chatting every day at 9 AM with his gardeners about their work and treating them, together with his chauffeur and the pilot of his private plane less, like servants than trusty friends. On weekends, the journalist continued, Hitler enjoyed the company of painters, singers, musicians and especially creative foreigners. He bred German shepherds and, when his governmental work was done, organized a kind of fun fair for children with cakes and sweets, and – assisted by the wives of ministers Göring und Goebbels – dancing and folksongs. Particularly courageous guests were taken out for a spin in Hitler’s plane. After dinner, Hitler held concerts in his retreat. Dr. Ernst Hanfstaengl, a well-known composer in Germany, would play piano.

Obviously, the Irish-Anglo journalist and Hitler admirer Fitz-Gerald had been treated to a spectacle worthy of the theatrical stage. With the exception of Magda Goebbels, none of the people to whom Fitz-Gerald had been introduced to in July 1935 (the Görings, Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop and German War Minister Werner von Blomberg) were actually part of the close circle Hitler invited to spend evenings with him in front of his fireplace. Even his former intimate Hanfstaengl had long been cut off from any real personal contact with Hitler by this point. Most likely, he had been summoned for one last visit because he spoke fluent English and was recognized as a friend and “piano player to the Führer.” In reality, he had fallen from grace on account of his criticism of clumsy government maneuvering, his arrogant behavior and backbiting within the Nazi Party. In November 1934, after conversations with Hitler, Goebbels had already confided to his diary that Hanfstaengl was “done for.” Alfred Rosenberg, too, had urged Hitler to drop the “pernicious pest” once and for all. By the time Fitz-Gerald’s *Home and Gardens* article appeared, Hanfstaengl had no longer resided in Munich for quite some time. In February 1937, after being told during a flight over Germany that he would soon be forced to parachute into Spain to fight in the Spanish Civil War, he had fled head over tail to Switzerland and then London. The incident on the flight was later dismissed as a joke. But as long as he didn’t have assurances from Hitler to that effect, Hanfstaengl didn’t dare return to Germany. Indeed, his fears were hardly unfounded. Goebbels, citing possible “revelations,” was working to have him “taken into custody...never to be released again” as soon as he set foot back on German soil. If Hanfstaengl were told what he knew, the propaganda minister fretted, he would “leave all the other émigrés in his shadow.”

Just as artificially selected were the photos Fitz-Gerald received for use in his article. The images were all by Hoffmann and had clearly be pre-sorted. One of them showed Hitler bent over an architectural sketch with Speer. This sort of depiction of the Führer as a master builder had already

been used for the title story of the *Illustrierter Beobachter* magazine in 1937. Nothing was left to chance when it came to preserving what had made Hitler so successful: the nimbus of a selfless, relentlessly laboring chancellor of the people, who had no real private life and who devoted his scant free time in a remote, rural location to friends, children and pets. But these idyllic, postcard images of life at Berghof, so widespread around the world in the 1930s, had just as little in common with the reality as Speer's self-serving, retrospective contention that daily existence on the Obersalzberg had been empty ritual which had left himself and all the other guests utterly bored.

Conclusion

From his political beginnings as the most talented and promising speechmaker of the National Socialism German Workers Party in Munich to his suicide in the air raid bunker of the Reich Chancellery in Berlin, Hitler was surrounded by a coterie of likeminded men and women. Only a handful are known to the broader public, and in the countless biographies of Hitler, they tend to lead a shadowy existence. When they do appear, they mostly sit entertaining the Führer in a Munich café, protect or chauffeur him around, or open the door to various visitors. They are eager paladins, always at the ready, lacking any influence and utterly devoted to a politician incapable of true emotions or human connections. At the same time, Hitler's fulminant rise is mostly attributed to his own exceptional capabilities, especially his ability to sway the masses. Hitler may have had helpers, so the logic runs, but ultimately he succeeded on his own in harnessing all existing forces to his own personal ends and political goals, callously using and disappointing everyone around him.

But how accurate is this view, based, as it is, primarily on the post-war narratives of the people from Hitler's circle before 1945. It is high time to focus attention on the individuals who came up with these stories and constantly publicized new versions of them – Hitler's inner circle or "court." Precise observation of their political and personal motivations and their relationships with Hitler shows that he was by no means the "lonely Führer" of many a historical narrative. On the contrary, from the very start, he would have been nothing without the others. They made him into what he became. Even if the make-up and function of circle around him fluctuated after 1933, it remained essential. While Hitler's court may no longer have served to propel him forward politically, it provided him with a lot of things, above all, a safe environment into which he could withdraw.

In 1919, in the immediate wake of the First World War, at a time when Hitler temporarily worked for the Reichswehr's propaganda division, it was impossible to foresee what was to come. Yet as soon as he joined the German Workers' Party, which gave birth to the Nazi Party in February 1920, a small but by no means homogenous circle of supporters had formed. Numbering no more than a dozen, Hitler's earliest party allies accompanied him to all his speeches in Munich's beer halls. These people included the writer Dietrich Eckart, Eckart's colleague Alfred Rosenberg, actually an architect, the Reichswehr officer Ernst Röhm, the young journalist and agitator Hermann Esser, the student Rudolf Hess, the clockmaker Emil Maurice and the horse trader Christian Weber. They not only ensured that Hitler was elected to lead the Nazi Party, which was still a tiny outfit confined to Bavaria, on 29 July 1921. They also socialized with him and introduced him to their families and

circles of friends. Conversely, Hitler always tried to place his confidantes in leadership positions within the party and its “storm division,” the SA, which was a major instrument of his power.

The bourgeois, well-connected Eckart solicited Edwin and Helene Bechstein as the first wealthy patrons for Hitler and the National Socialist movement. Other crucial supporters were the publisher’s son Ernst Hanfstaengl, the photographer Heinrich Hoffmann, Sigfried and Winifred Wagner and above all the publishing couple Hugo and Elsa Bruckmann. All of them were anti-Semites. And they were all united by the goal of ruthlessly undermining and eradicating Weimar democracy. When Hitler was convicted of treason and incarcerated in Landsberg Prison for joining Erich Ludendorff in an unsuccessful putsch against the Bavarian regional government on 9 November 1923, these people didn’t turn their backs on him. On the contrary, it was then that a set circle of patrons congealed. They reached decisions amongst themselves, provided Hitler with money, gifts and positive reinforcement while he was in prison, and gave him access to their homes and salons once he was released. They provided him with a wardrobe, vehicles and respectable apartments and established contacts for him with industrialists and financiers inside and outside Germany. They were fully invested in the man they considered their rising star, even though the Nazi Party remained on the political margins until 1930 and the Bavarian government repeatedly tried to deport Hitler back to Austria – efforts that only failed because Hitler’s home country refused to take him back. But beyond his wealthy patrons, Hitler also relied on an environment that bolstered him psychologically in his everyday existence and provided reliable henchmen. Hitler may have already been called the Führer within these circles, but in reality the leader was very dependent on the friends who had invented that title for him and expected him to help realize their common dream of a “new Reich.”

After Hitler was named Reich chancellor on 30 January 1933 and subsequently established himself as an absolute dictator, this situation fundamentally changed. Hitler wanted to put the years of his rise behind him. More and more frequently, he retreated into his cordoned-off refuge on the Obersalzberg, creating the greatest possible distance to other leaders of the Third Reich. At Berghof, he surrounded himself with old and new confidantes who were dependent on him for their careers, and not vice versa, and thus were particularly loyal. Their number included Hoffmann, the doctors Theodor Morell and Karl Brandt, his adjutant Nicolaus von Below, his press spokesman Otto Dietrich, Albert Speer and Martin Bormann. This circle, which included Hitler’s consort Eva Braun and the wives and children of his intimates, also had both a social and a political function. As had been the case before 1933, the two weren’t clearly distinguishable. This “substitute family” offered him support, bolstered his confidence and could be deployed in a variety of ways. For that reason, we must assume that its members knew of Hitler’s crimes and, in some cases, helped perpetrate them. Moreover, everyone in Hitler’s “court” led a privileged life, receiving valuable gifts, sizeable sums of money and – in some cases – special authority. Speer and Brandt, for instance, became powerful

potentates in the Third Reich, while Hoffmann and Morell profited financially and were able to establish miniature empires.

After 1945, most of the surviving members of Berghof society considered themselves a community bound by mutual fate, whose members had “experienced historical years together” and were tied to one another for their “entire lives” (Margarethe Speer). In post-war Germany, many of them fled, were interned and underwent years of interrogations by occupation officers, criminal trials and de-Nazification procedures. Almost all of Hitler’s former friends and associates denied knowing about the genocidal crimes of the Nazi regime and stylized themselves as victims of the victorious Allies’ policies of social cleansing. Because they collectively faced accusations of being accomplices to horror, because their personal and material existences were under threat, and the possibility that they would plummet down the social ladder was very real, they showed neither guilt nor regret. Far from it - they tended to show strong solidarity with one another and to work toward the creation of collective legends. Yet their reinterpretations of the past would have hardly attracted public notice, if historians hadn’t repeated and lent academic credence to the legends they concocted to exculpate themselves. For decades, such memoirs and recollections, amplified by the media, dominated the German and international public’s picture of Hitler and his social circle. In this regard, the members of this “circle of destiny,” as Hitler’s army adjutant Gerhard Engel described them, achieved a measure of control, which still persists today, over the interpretation of their own past.